DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 718 IR 013 401

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TITLE Parents as Mediators of the Child's Television Environment.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Educational Media International; n4 p7-11 1984

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; Children; *Cognitive Development; Family Structure; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Influence; *Parent Role; Regression (Statistics); *Television Viewing

ABSTRACT

Two studies investigated the role that parental attitudes and behavior play in filtering the complexity of the world into manageable forms for children. Cognitive and behavioral patterns used as dependent variables were cognition (reading scores, language use, general information, beliefs, reality-fantasy discrimination); imagination; comprehension of television content; waiting ability; physical aggression; and school behavioral adjustment. Home influences used as independent variables included family characteristics (parents' values, attitudes toward child-rearing and discipline, mediation styles, belief-systems, family structure, and daily lifestyle); and the television environment (average weekly viewing by parent and child, type of programming, emphasis on television, television mediation, and rules). Data were gathered by questionnaires, interviews, and home recording devices. The first study involved predictions of behavior across several years from the independent variables. The second study was a shorter term prediction based on more extensive data collected from the children on their parents' behavior. Results showed that the family patterns relevant to the question of cognitive and behavior skills included parents who: value imagination and resourcefulness or responsibility and stability; do not emphasize power-assertive discipline; actively mediate the outside world through explanation and discussion; and watch less television themselves. (9 references) (MES)

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PARENTS AS MEDIATORS OF THE CHILD'S TELEVISION ENVIRONMENT

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Children today, at least in countries like the United States, are growing up in a new kind of environment, one in which the formative influences on the child's consciousness, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour are not only their parents or siblings but also the varied and complex input from the television set. Our recent research has been directed at examining the role that parental attitudes and behaviour play in filtering the complexity of the world into manageable forms for children. To what extent do parents also treat the television set as a source of input for children which requires adult mediation? An emergent orientation towards child development pioneered by the Israeli psychologist, Reuven Feurestein, has suggested that children's capacities to develop learning skills and self-directed effective use of their naturally-developing cognitive capacities depend upon the extent to which their parents have intervened early and continuously in mediating and shaping the complex environment stimuli that surround them. With the television set so prominently featured in the American home, watched perhaps four to six hours daily by millions of children between the ages of four and twelve, it would follow that parental mediation — or lack of such mediation — of television-viewing may be an important feature of the child's cognitive and affective growth.

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Delineating Influences Upon the Developing Child

Our research strategy has involved first of all identifying the array of potential influences within the home life of the preschool or early elementary school-aged child which might independently but cumulatively influence the child's emerging knowledge of the world, language and reading skill, beliefs about the relative dangers of the world, imagination, understanding of the television medium, self-restraint or motor control, aggressive behaviour and behavioural adjustment to school routine. Table 1 presents a list of the specific

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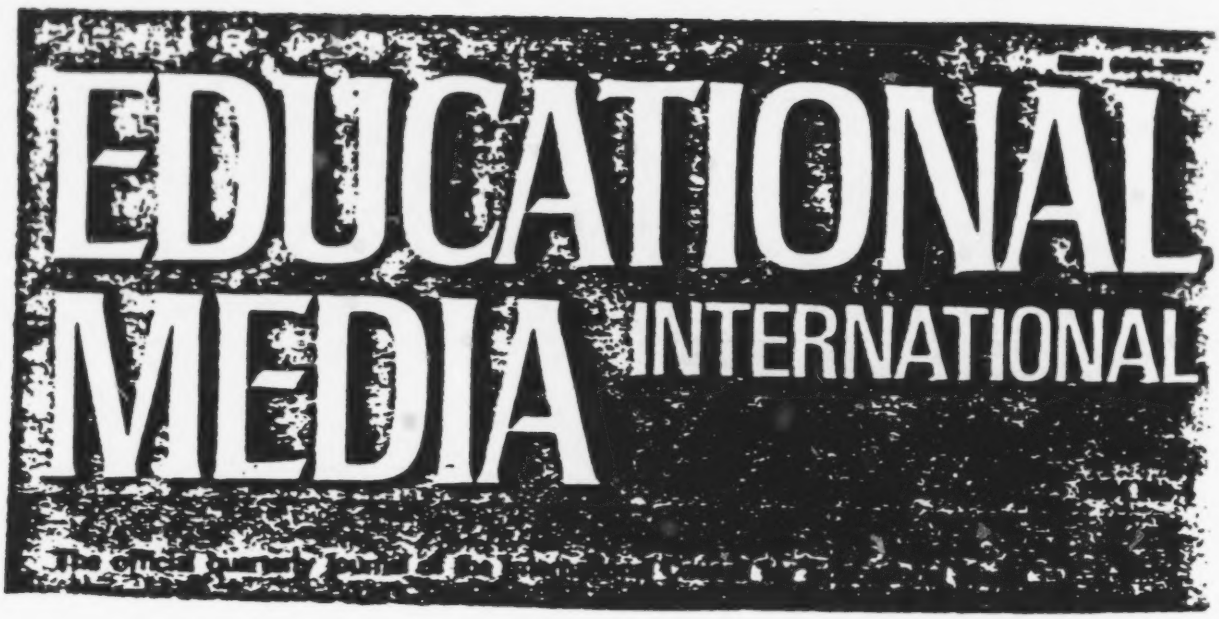

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variables we have examined with two different samples of children of lower and lower-middle class socio-economic status backgrounds. In the left-hand column we list some of the variables we have measured to estimate two general classes of home influence, (a) the parents' personal self-description or values, their general mediation style, their specific orientation to child-rearing and discipline (including emphasis on physical punishment) and their patterns of daily household organisation or recreational activities and (b) the home television environment, eg number and location of television sets, parents' viewing frequencies, children's viewing frequencies (and types of programmes viewed) and, finally, the extent to which parents seek to control and influence the child's amount of viewing and programme selection by imposing rules and by discussing the medium. Space does not permit a review of the various questionnaire, interview or home recording devices used to obtain scores for these independent variables. In a number of cases scores were based on factor analyses of a group of measures. In the second of the two studies being summarised here, data on parental mediation was

Table 1

HOME INFLUENCES (INDEPENDENT VARIABLES) AS PREDICTORS OF COGNITIVE OR BEHAVIOURAL MEASURES (DEPENDENT VARIABLES) IN YOUNG CHILDREN — A MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Home Influences
(Independent Variables)

- *Family Characteristics*
  - — Parents' self-described values, eg Resourcefulness (imagination, curiosity, adventurousness, creativity).
  - — Parents' attitudes toward discipline & child-rearing, eg Power-assertive vs Inductive methods.
  - — Parental Mediation Styles: Explaining vs Disciplining
  - — Parents' belief-systems: 'Mean & Scary World' test.
  - — Family structure and stress level; single-parent family etc.
  - — Daily Life Style
    sleep patterns;
    organised daily routines;
    diverse cultural activities vs limited outside activities;
    emphasis on outdoor sports, etc.
- *The Television Environment*
  - — Average weekly viewing by children
  - — Type of programming, eg Action-Adventure (Realistic or Fantasy), Cartoons, etc.
  - — Average weekly viewing by father & mother
  - — Home emphasis on TV, eg, cable or HBO, number of sets.
  - — Television Mediation (Parent report)
  - — Television Rules (Child's Report)

Cognitive and Behavioural Patterns
(Dependent Variables)

- *Cognition*
  - — Reading scores (Recognition and Comprehension)
  - — Language use
  - — General Information
  - — Beliefs ('Mean World')
  - — Reality-Fantasy Discrimination
- *Imagination*
  - — Inkblots, Interview, block play
- *Comprehension of TV Content*
  - — Swiss Family Robinson plot
  - — Commercial understanding
  - — Television special effects
- *Waiting Ability*
  - — Spaceman; delaying ability
  - — Motor restlessness during spontaneous waiting period
- *Physical Agression*
- *School Behavioural Adjustment*

obtained not only from parents but from children's descriptions of their parents' behaviour in various situations, eg during meals, on a visit, at the doctor's, while television was on and children also reported on whether parents imposed rules about television-viewing.

In effect, then, our home variables may be regarded as encompassing an almost inclusive array of the kinds of influences that may be brought to bear on the child. We have not included measures of older sibling influences because most of our subjects were first born or the older children of their families; the intensive home observations of Alison Alexander suggest that older siblings do play some mediating role in joint television-watching by explaining codes or predicting outcomes for younger siblings. Peer group influences are also unstudied, although they undoubtedly are important, particularly with somewhat older children than the five to eight-year-olds of these two studies. In general, however, we can regard our home and family variables as reasonably comprehensive potential influences (built upon presumed constitutional variations) on how the child forms its concepts of the world, learns to use language, learns to pretend and to restrain motor activity or aggressive behaviour.

Some Hypothesised Relationships: The Special Role of Television-Viewing

In what special ways may parental attitudes, child-rearing orientations or household-management styles influence the child? There is ample evidence, for example, that children's aggressive behaviour (unwarranted physical fighting as distinct from appropriate self-assertion) is linked to familial emphases on violence, frequent physical punishment of children, or the use of power-assertive disciplinary methods. Studies by Tower have indicated that parents' own values along three dimensions, *resourcefulness* (imagination, creativity, curiosity etc.) *reliability* (efficiency, competence, punctuality) and *relationship* (friendly, generous, sincere, likeable) are differentially reflected in the spontaneous play or school behaviour of children as early as the preschool level.

Of special interest for our research were whether television-viewing patterns of the children might have a special influence over-and-above these family inputs upon their development. One might, for example, hypothesise that exposure to the varied content and rich vocabulary of television, certainly providing the child with a wider 'window on the world' than parental communication could possibly afford, would enhance the child's language use, general information, awareness of 'reality', imaginative resources and so on. Certainly, experimental studies have shown that exposure to appropriate children's programming with some additional adult mediation can enhance cognitive and prosocial skills such as sharing, friendliness, and cooperation.

On the other hand, there is the possibility that heavy television-viewing may actually generate an orientation in the child that is counterproductive to the development of useful language and learning skills. The rapid pacing, intercutting and 'attention-gaining by any means' format of television may foster a dependence on direct viewing solely, displacing other necessary self-play or social interactions needed for instance, for effective internalisation of imagination and language usage. Furthermore, heavy-viewing may expose the child to the extensive violent content, car chases and other grossly active characteristics of the medium and thus impede the building-in of self-restraints or may be sanctioning the child's use of aggression as a frequent form for coping with adversity. As the research by Salomon has suggested, heavy TV-viewing may be associated with a casual, superficial style of cognitive processing, a search for easy entertainment without the attempt to invest the mental effort that would lead to more useful learning. It is possible, however, that where parents take an active mediating stance toward television, institute rules about viewing or comment about programmes, the child may acquire a more discriminating and critical stance toward the medium and, thus, fail to show the more negative effects of viewing and perhaps even learn some constructive orientations.

Some Research Findings: Parent-TV Interaction

In discussing our results we will be condensing findings for two separate investigations, one involving predictions of behaviour across several years from the independent variables (Study 1) and the second a shorter-term prediction based, however, on more extensive data collected from the children on the parents' behaviour (Study 2). The basic data analysis tactic is that of multiple regression analysis in which we seek to determine what combination of independent variables yields the highest prediction of the child's cognitive and behavioural patterns. This procedure also permits us to estimate whether

family or television variables make *independent* contributions to our prediction equations thus providing evidence on whether television effects may simply reflect general familial orientations, eg children from certain families simply like more TV, or whether the television-viewing predicts behaviour even when other variables are already accounted for (partialled out).

We can consider our findings from the two studies by simply reviewing each of the dependent variables in Table 1. Thus our data indicate that the child's early reading readiness and achievement is best predicted by an independent combination of family and television-viewing variables. More specifically, where parents themselves adopt a view of the world as a hostile, 'scary' place, where the children watch more television and when the family is from a lower social class (a smaller effect), children then show poorer reading scores. For general information, our data yield a generally similar result. While general intelligence is the best predictor of the child's general information, a combination of variables involving less television-watching by the child, more television rules imposed by parent (child's report), a less fearful view of the world by parents and greater parental self-evaluation as imaginative and resourceful, all add substantially and independently to the prediction. Essentially, a similar result emerges for the child's effective use of language.

Turning to beliefs in a scary world, our data from Study 1 were especially strong in indicating that heavy TV-viewing by the child, especially of the more violent realistic action-adventure programming, was predictive of later beliefs in a more frightening or dangerous immediate environment. For Study 2, the child's perception of the mother as more frequently making negative comments about situations plus the failure of parents to impose rules about television-viewing predicted the higher 'Scary World' scores in children. We also considered the ability to discriminate real from fantasy occurrences, eg 'Can a man stop a speeding train with his hands?' It was predicted best by the child's intelligence, the family's imposition of rules about TV-viewing (as reported by the child), by *less* time spent watching television, by parents who showed a more forceful disciplinary stance, but who *also* explained events to the child. In effect, the heavy-viewing child whose parents put few restrictions on viewing and made less effort to mediate the environment was more likely to confuse fantasy and impossible events with reality.

Our study of imaginativeness was carried out only in Study 1. Here our data indicated clearly that a combination of less TV-viewing and a more imaginatively-oriented parent predicted more creative block-play or imaginative response to inkblots by the children. With respect to the child's ability to comprehend and to reproduce clearly the plots of television programming, our data as measured in Study 2 clearly indicated the combined effects of parental role and the television medium. Children who reported that their parents imposed rules about television-watching, whose mothers themselves watch *less* television, and who described their mothers as likely to make positive remarks in a variety of situations were *better* able to identify plot details or to provide organised accounts of what they had witnessed in an episode of *Swiss Family Robinson*. These results are independent of the children's intelligence or the family's social class background. When we turn to the child's comprehension of the nature and purpose of commercial advertising on television, the combination of a parental style emphasising mediation generally as well as one imposing rules on television (child's report) predicts better comprehension along with but independent of the child's IQ and SES background. Family mediation also plays an important role in predicting the child's ability to explain special effects such as 'zooms'.

We can next turn to some possible family and television correlates of the overt behaviour of the child. We measured restlessness or lack of self-restraint in a number of ways, eg inability to sit still for a long period in a simulated astronaut capsule, restlessness as observed during an observed waiting period of ten minutes (Study 1), restlessness and impulsive motor activity while watching some films with a parent (Study 2). Our results consistently implicate heavy television-viewing by the child, especially of the more violent programming, in predicting greater restlessness or less ability to sit quietly. Factors such as mothers who are perceived as more likely to be pleasant and supportive by the child, who describe themselves as more imaginative and creative, and who run a more orderly household also come into play in predicting less restless behaviour.

The prediction of the overt aggressive behaviour of the child shows a generally similar pattern. Heavier viewing of violent programming or of television more generally, heavier viewing of television by parents and, in general, more emphasis by parents on physical discipline and power-assertion, all

predict greater aggressive behaviour by the children. The same results emerge when school reports of poor behavioural adjustment are used as the dependent variables.

Some Conclusions: Parental Control of Television

In summary, our study of family patterns and their relationship to television-viewing and children's development lead to a clear indication of the combined influences of parental styles and television-viewing on the emerging cognitive and behavioural tendencies of elementary school children of both sexes. We have identified several types of family patterns that seem especially relevant to the child's acquisition of cognitive skills or to the child's development of motor restraint, less aggression and better school behavioural adjustment. These include parents who:

— personally value imagination and resourcefulness or responsibility and stability,

— do not emphasise power-assertive discipline and physical punishment,

— actively mediate the outside world for children through explanation and discussion rather than peremptory discipline or judgmental assertions and

— watch less television themselves and who hold a less 'mean and scary' view of their environment.

These family life variables are not sufficient to explain the child's cognitive and behavioural scores. The amount and type of the child's television-viewing does prove to be an important predictor of behaviour; indeed, it seems clear from our own studies that heavy TV-viewing puts the child at serious risk by early school age of failing to obtain significant world information, of poor reading skills, a poor discrimination of reality from fantasy, less imaginative skill, a more fearful view of the world, greater restlessness and more aggression — all contributory to a poor behavioural adjustment when the child is beginning at school. A critical role seems to be played, however, by parental intervention in the child's use of television. Thus even without a more general mediating family style, parents who set rules about television-viewing, who pre-screen programmes from newspaper guides or discuss and restrict viewing may indeed be establishing an atmosphere that leads the child towards more critical viewing. We conclude that parents and educators must increasingly recognise that an important feature of child-rearing requires careful attention to the role of the television set in the child's daily life.

Our studies and our work with parent and school groups suggest several avenues for effective early intervention with children. A series of eight school lessons we have developed provide children in the early elementary grades with lessons on such topics as how television works, how special effects are produced, the role of violence or of stereotypes in TV-content, the purpose and potential deceptiveness of commercials, and how news is edited. Research studies and applications in schools suggest the value of such an approach. Special guides for parents are also available. These are designed to alert parents to an early establishment of television rules, to increased use of restrictions on frequency and pattern of viewing (eg 'only after school homework'), and on how to discuss constructive content from shared viewing experiences. We cannot change over-all family structures but we hope to raise parental consciousness so that parents can decide who is to raise their children — the live adults in the home or the fantasy figures on television.

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Footnote

Study 1 was supported by a grant from the Spencer Foundation; Study 2 was supported by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation.